

IV. Community Design

What is Community Design

"Good community design presumes using practical and aesthetic principles to create a community that functions at a high standard. Such a place provides its residents with a quality of life that responds to the needs for beauty, safety, health, economy, leisure, recreation and vitality.... " (Chapter 11, p. 1).

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Existing Conditions

The area within the Plan represents one of the most prominent places within the community. Research shows that the current development pattern primarily occurred from the early seventies on, and certainly the style of architecture and site layout bears that out. The Plan area is important from a number of different design aspects. It is primarily a major corridor, an important gateway to the community, and anchored by two important community nodes on each end. Each of these aspects will be discussed in this chapter.

Corridors

The Comprehensive Plan identifies Sunset Avenue and Winstead Avenue as major corridors in the City. The Plan further identifies Buck Leonard Boulevard and Zebulon Road as being important corridors as well. A number of facets will be evaluated for effective quality and impact.

Gateways

Gateways are the front doors of the City. Just as a private residence will place special emphasis on the design, maintenance and quality of the front entry door, so do cities with effective gateways. The Sunset Avenue Corridor is anchored on the eastern end by Buck Leonard Boulevard providing a direct connection to US 64 and the first impressions of the City to many who travel to this community. On the western end there is a more remote but no less important connection at Sunset and Winstead. Gateways are frequently defined by such important details as welcoming signage, an emphasis on landscape, and dramatic lighting. It is the welcoming porch light for the community.

The eastern gateway at Buck Leonard Boulevard and Sunset Avenue

Goal

" A City in which the whole community, its residential neighborhoods and commercial areas uphold high consistent standards for historic preservation, beautification, sidewalk and roadway enhancements, landscaping and natural open spaces" (Chapter 11, p.14)

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The intersection at Buck Leonard and Sunset.

is the most direct connection to US 64 of all the highway exits. The length of this connection is quite short and right-of-way landscape enhancements are generally attractive with Bradford pear trees, crepe myrtles, and shrubbery in the median. However, the actual intersection is of mixed impact. Since the publication of *The Comprehensive Plan*, two of the four corners have been redeveloped in a positive attractive manner. The two western parcels at this intersection now have new drug stores facilities on them while the southeastern parcel remains vacant. This intersection suffers from lack of physical identification as a gateway. While there are some plantings here, the landscape elements could be intensified. There are no gateway signs to welcome people to our community. There are no lighting fixtures which emphasize this as a special point of arrival. There are no special gateway fencing details nor berms to frame the "view" into the City.

The western entrance to the study area is at Winstead Avenue and Sunset Avenue. The approach to this intersection from US-64 down North Winstead Avenue is one of the most attractive in the City. Great efforts have been made to reduce the impact of utility lines,



plant street trees, and provide attractive lighting on Winstead Avenue. The development and landscaping here is in general attractive with established crepe myrtles and trees on several corners and well-designed maintained buildings along its length.

Nodes

The Comprehensive Plan denotes intersections of major arterials as being nodes and places for interaction by residents and visitors. This places both the eastern and westernmost intersections in that dual category. The intersection at Sunset Avenue and Winstead Avenue is undoubtedly one of the busiest intersections within the City. The surrounding parcels are highly desirable real estate, and the overall quality of the surrounding development ranges from quite attractive to adequate. The quality of people interaction is, however, hampered by the lack of pedestrian crossings and similar pedestrian-scaled amenities. In addition, inconsistent and frequently inadequate use of landscape materials to beautify, quiet, and buffer the effects of vehicles could be greatly improved.

Landscape

The use of trees and landscape is an important element in community design. There are two considerations in landscape, the preservation of existing established green spaces within the City fabric and the installation of new landscape elements. An example of existing established trees, Patterson Park, provides an excellent opportunity for green space in the area. The park winds as a green ribbon, terminating along the south side of Sunset Avenue. Additional existing large trees are found somewhat sporadically in the remaining area. Historically though, development in the area has resulted in the complete removal of all existing vegetation, robbing the community of large trees in far too much of the City. The preservation of remaining large specimen trees should be strongly encouraged.

The second aspect of landscape involves the new landscape elements. The large tree species at the schoolyard at Englewood Elementary represent welcome additions to the City landscape. Recent development has been required to invest in more landscape with attractive ornamental trees such as crepe myrtles and shrubbery. These elements can have enormous benefits to a parcel. They can be used effectively putting the visual emphasis on the important entry and signage of a business by reducing the impact of the parking



Patterson Park



Established Specimen Trees



The screening of service areas greatly improves the view from the r-o-w.



N. Winstead Ave (above) contrast in design to Sunset Avenue (below)



October 12, 2004

lot and screening service areas. Landscaping has other practical applications as well, including the reduction of solar heat build-up. Continued improvement, both on the right-of-way and on private land, will greatly benefit the corridor.

Parking

Appropriate amounts of parking are critical to the welfare of business. Sunset Avenue provides opportunity for parking which is not available in more densely developed areas. Ideally parking placement should be designed to lessen the environmental and aesthetic impact. For whole sections of the corridor area, parking lots dominate the visual scene. In addition, the design of parking areas should interact well in a connective manner with vehicular and pedestrian access. Connective design from adjacent development to side street driveways, discussed more in the transportation chapter, is frequently desirable from a community design aspect as well as providing safer and more logical traffic patterns.

Pedestrian

Pedestrian scale and access along the corridor has a very limited presence. Lack of sidewalks, crosswalks, and similar amenities do not support the population who walk in our community both for health and economic reasons. Site planning which ignores comfortable and safe pedestrian usage is prevalent. While Sunset is a vehicular dominated corridor, pedestrian accommodation and some pedestrian scale is appropriate.

Utilities

The current condition of utility line placement along Sunset is the most intense of anywhere within the community. The poles which line the Avenue, frequently on both sides, are filled with innumerable lines of differing diameters. The quality of the wooden utility poles themselves is not attractive and the intense haphazard array of disparate lines running off at odd angles does nothing but create a messy sky view for resident and visitor alike. This is particularly evident at the Winstead Avenue intersection where the relative cleanliness of the sky viewed to the north stands in sharp contrast to the view east. The issue of these lines is first and foremost a monetary one. The placement of lines underground has economic implications the City is not at liberty to solve at this time. Other alternatives will be discussed later in this chapter.

Lighting

Lighting is an important part of a community. The right-of-way lighting should be evaluated for conformance with the State DOT standards and maintained at the appropriate level. Ideally site lighting should be promote safety and add a sense of vitality that highlights the Corridor. It is important to recognize the distinction between commercial needs and the residential uses that sometimes are immediately adjacent on the Corridor. An example of poor lighting allows too much light pollution affecting neighboring development. Lighting plans which contain the light overflow through effective selection of placement and fixtures are particularly important at such junctures.

Signs

The Sunset Corridor has examples of fine, attractive, and clear signage at many businesses. There are however other examples which are not as effective. The poorer signs may be too large to relate to the buildings in close proximity. They may be too tall to be effective from the driver's perspective on Sunset. Good signage must be clear and easily seen to do the job intended. Certainly, use of company logos and color schemes help identify the property and should be maintained. The Land Development Code (LDC) will address many of these inconsistencies as property owners update their signs. The dif-





difficulty arises in the length of time for a new vision in sign consistency to come into physical existence. The result is a continuation of the visual clutter which does little to properly promote the businesses in the Plan area. In addition there are also too many examples of temporary banner-type signs, which are not temporary in usage. There are too many signs which are missing or damaged, some of these have been in this state for long periods of time. While there are certainly examples of attractive effective signs within the area, much improvement can be made.

Landscape Buffers and Fencing

Landscape buffers and fencing are important to the wellbeing of the corridor. Some examples of this are done more effectively than others. Fencing should ideally provide attractive security and be a positive addition to the property. Landscape elements are critical to the reduction of clutter and the improvement of the image of the Corridor. The graphic on the opposite page illustrates how the line of site can be effectively improved from the right of way with well designed landscape elements. This places emphasis away from the parking lot image and showcases the businesses themselves.

Guiding Principles

In developing guiding principles, the input of the public was considered along with the pertinent elements of Chapter 11 of *The Comprehensive Plan*. The following are Chapter 11- Objectives and Strategies which are important to the context of the Sunset Avenue Corridor Area:

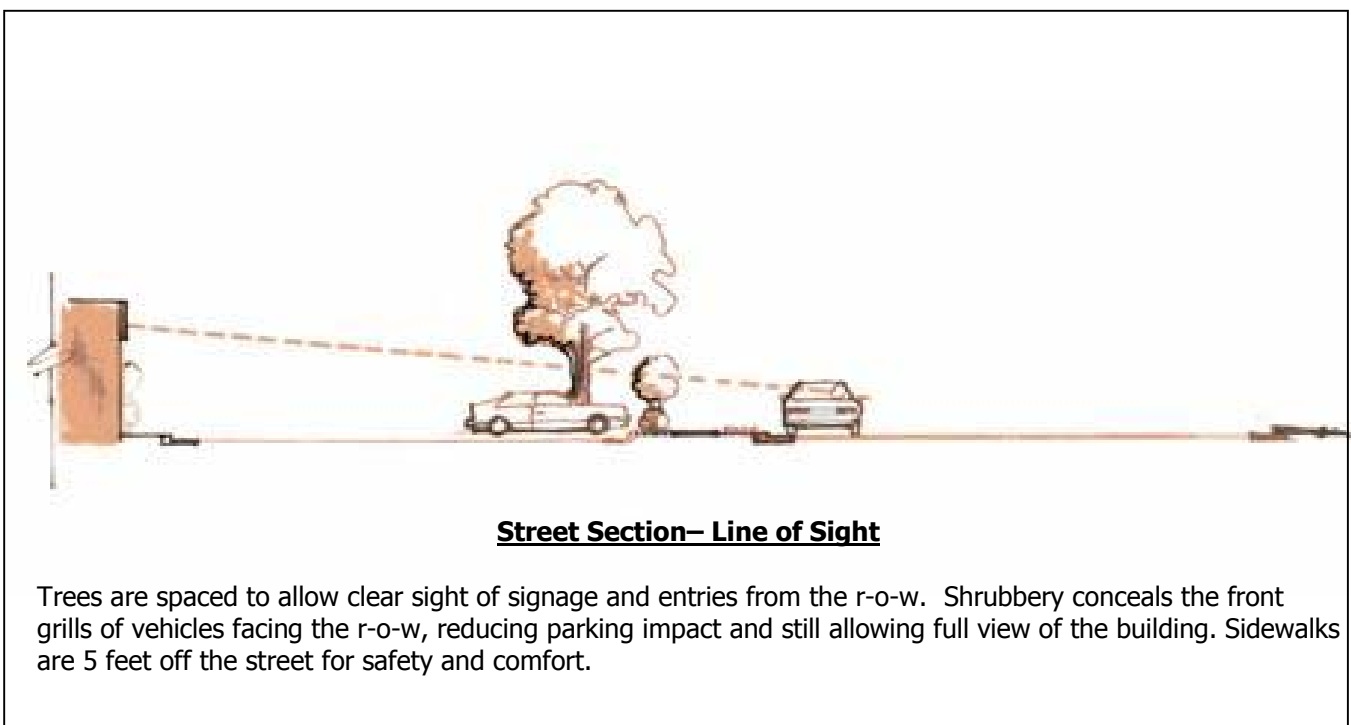
- Enhance the built environment
- Improve the image of our major corridors including Sunset Avenue
- Maintain local community character
- Study the feasibility of developing zoning overlay districts to address private property
- Improve the image of major gateways
- Consider landscaped treatments for medians where feasible
- Implement and maintain consistent landscape and signage at major gateways
- Utilize enhancements by Tree Power
- Encourage property owners to participate in enhancement efforts



Recommendations

The City Council adopted the Land Development Code (LDC) on July 12, 2004, which will provide some much needed changes to the development practices of the past. The recommendation is to create a zoning overlay district, which will compliment the LDC, offering additional attention to this important place within the community. The overlay district will add specific requirements to those of the base zoning ordinance. This will allow for standards to meet the specific scale and context of the Sunset Avenue corridor. The zoning overlay district would include the recommendations presented here.

Based on the analysis of existing conditions, public input, and the guiding principles already outlined, there are a number of categories which could be focused on to improve the built environment on Sunset. In looking at these requirements, it is important to note in most cases, there can be no retroactive requirements placed upon an existing property. These would be applied over time with the advent of new, redeveloped properties or exterior additions requiring a building permit. As in all government regulations, encouraging progress for the good of the community must not outweigh property owner's rights. The balance of individual rights versus public good must be kept.



The following recommendations for the proposed zoning overlay district are made for consideration:

Provide a unique sense of place within Rocky Mount that is both beautiful and supportive of the appropriate land use adjacent to the corridor.

1. Develop gateway design for Buck Leonard Boulevard and Sunset Avenue to include welcoming signage and landscape materials set off with dramatic lighting.
2. Provide a clear and visible entrance for buildings from the right of way.
3. Feature windows, public entrances and/or architectural features which break the walls facing the right-of-way. Long unarticulated walls visible from the right-of-way shall be screened by having at least 40 percent of the wall area masked by plantings which feature a mixture of landscape types with trees and shrubs (evergreen and deciduous).
4. Restrict metal and modular buildings from the corridor area.

Promote the relative prominence of green within the Plan area and reduce the impact of large expansive parking.

1. Increase the number of appropriate street trees which will enhance the Corridor without causing implication with the utility lines. Crepe myrtle, redbud, Japanese maple, dwarf magnolia, serviceberry, Fringetree, dogwood, small Hollies, crabapples, cherry laurel, cherry plum, Japanese apricot and Japanese flowering cherry are all recommended species for planting near power lines.
2. Encourage the preservation of existing major tree stands and large specimen trees within the area.
3. Reduce the impact of parking along the right-of-way through:
 - Strategic placement of parking at the side and the rear of a proposed 40 percent of parking spaces where site configuration will allow.
 - Use of trees spaced no more than 60 feet apart within paved parking lots over 12 cars in capacity.
 - Use of shrubbery placed between the right-of-way and parking areas which is at least 60 percent evergreen, and will grow to a minimum of 30 inches within three years to reduce view of parked cars and paved areas from the right-of-way where site configuration allows.



This example of sidewalks and street trees could be utilized in some conditions on Sunset Avenue. (Chattanooga TN)

Promote health, safety, and security for the citizens and property in the area.

1. Provide sidewalks for pedestrian usage as discussed in the Transportation chapter. Evaluate developmental proposals for effective access and connectivity to pedestrian and multimodal participants.
2. Utilize chain link or privacy fencing only in side and back yards of parcels, and may not extend in front of buildings or setback lines.
3. Restrict barb wire and electrical fencing from the area.
4. Reduce individual driveway cuts and promote shared parking plans where feasible as a safer and more aesthetically pleasing design.
5. Improve lighting fixtures on the right-of-way for increased visibility, safety, attractiveness, and emphasis on the Corridor.

Provide adequate services to Sunset Avenue while reducing any negative visual impact of those services.

1. Reduce the visual clutter associated with the myriad of utility lines. Ideally these utilities should be underground but an alternative plan would call for consolidation and coordination of the lines on a single side of the Corridor on new attractive utility poles similar to the approach taken on North Winstead Avenue. The City should investigate these options.
2. Restrict outdoor storage for uses within the area.
3. Screen service and loading areas from view of the public right-of-way and adjacent property by buildings, solid walls combined with vegetation, or evergreen plantings.
4. Reduce the effects of technology intrusion and visual clutter by restricting cell towers, radio towers, and large satellite dishes from the Corridor area.

Organize and identify development along Sunset Avenue in a way that promotes the community as a whole.

1. Install attractive informational signage which highlights community features.
2. Require all businesses to prominently display address numbers.
3. Restrict new billboards/outdoor advertising signs as out-of-scale with the surrounding community along Sunset Avenue.
4. Allow all businesses to utilize their existing logos and color



For virtually all of Sunset, there are no sidewalks.



preferences for signage while allowing for a support standard that provides consistency, clarity, and proportion to the corridor.

5. Restrict signs in windows and signs viewable through windows to cover 10 percent of the total glass area on any one elevation.
6. Restrict the use of brilliant chromatic color schemes on building elevations to no more than 10 percent of the visible elevation.
7. Amortize non-conforming signs (excluding billboards) to take place seven years from date of original sign permit or four years from adoption of the Plan whichever is longer.

Summary

The prominence of the Sunset Avenue Corridor Area makes it especially important to focus attention on the functional aesthetics of community design. Attention to such things as landscaping, consistency of signage, and reduction of clutter will not only improve the appearance of the area but encourage vitality for the coming years. These recommendations will by no means produce immediate impact. The change, with the single exception of standardized signs, would only apply when major additions or new development occurred to a property in the Sunset Avenue Corridor area. For many established businesses, this will mean no changes in the immediate future. In the mean time, those sites which are developed or redeveloped will have a standard which will improve over time the appearance and economic vitality of the entire corridor.

"The City of Rocky Mount deserves community design that is appropriate to the context of our community in articulation, scale, and proportion...design that takes reference from and contributes to the fullness of life" (Chapter 11, p.7). *Together Tomorrow— Tier 1 Smart Growth Comprehensive Plan.*

